

## **STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS**

**February 28, 2019**

**George Dunlap**

**Chairman, Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners**

- Good morning! Welcome to the 2019 State of the County address for Mecklenburg County.
- This is a time for us to come together to recognize the great accomplishments that have taken place in our County over the last 12 months. As the chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, I consider it an honor and privilege to continue in this longstanding tradition.
- First, I would like to thank everyone for being here this morning. I would also like to acknowledge those who are watching our livestream, as well as those who are watching on the Government Channel.
- I would also like to thank my colleagues and fellow Board members for joining me on this occasion.
- It is truly a privilege to work with you. We have an awesome responsibility to the residents of Mecklenburg County. I would like to thank you for your continued dedication and willingness to labor together for such a wonderful cause!
- To our elected officials from across the County who are present today...(ACKNOWLEDGE OFFICIALS IN THE AUDIENCE)
- Thank you for your partnership and continued service to our community.
- I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge our County Manager, Dena Diorio. Thank you, Dena, for your continued professionalism. Over the last 5 years as County Manager, you have proven yourself to be an invaluable leader with a tenacious spirit. The Board and I appreciate your efforts to provide the best to our residents and our employees.
- And to the Executive Team and County staff, thank you for supporting the County Manager and her vision, as well as, all that you do to benefit of our residents.

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- The current State of the County is STRONG, and it is my mission and vision as Chair to continue in that direction.
- Often when there is a change in leadership, the new leader will implement several unnecessary changes in hopes of leaving a legacy, at the cost of slowing down progress. I am not interested in changing the course that has already been set, because it is working, but instead I would like to increase the pace in which changes are made.
- The first year of the Meck Pre-K Program was a huge success and I would like to keep the momentum going – by moving forward with the program in hopes of achieving even more successes in year two.
- The County’s goal of providing educational resources to our school system is working – and I would like to keep the momentum going by continuing with the projects outlined in the Capital Improvement Plan and approved by the voters in 2017.
- But there are some instances when change is necessary and sometimes long overdue. I vow to always support necessary changes that lead to an improvement in the lives of our residents and employees.
- Earlier this month we announced that the minimum hourly rate for regular full-time County employees would increase from - \$11.65 an hour to \$15 dollars an hour.
- The increase will affect 89 County employees – and they will see the earnings in their March 8 paycheck. The increase will cost the County 176 thousand dollars – including benefits.
- Increasing the hourly rate – is a good change – because it means being able to attract and retain the most qualified employees.
- Increasing the hourly rate – is a good change – because it means more money for employees to provide for themselves and their families.
- Increasing the hourly rate – is a good change – because the more money people have – the more they will have to save and spend – which equates to more money to help fuel our already strong economy.
- As chair, it is my hope that at the end of my term, our united efforts as a Board will result in creating more opportunities that places our residents on a trajectory of upward mobility improving their lives and the lives of their families for generations to come.

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- Since our last State of the County address, the nation has enjoyed a strong economy with low unemployment and inflationary pressures, and the same holds true here in Mecklenburg County.
- As of December of 2018, Mecklenburg County's unemployment rates were trending below the State and National levels -- coming in at 3.4% versus 3.7% for the US and 3.8% for North Carolina
- And the number of new jobs in the County continues to grow.
- Last year, Governor Roy Cooper announced more than 19 thousand new jobs in North Carolina; with Mecklenburg County landing the two largest projects in the state as measured by job creation totals: That's Amazon's distribution center, which will create 1,500 jobs; and AvidXchange's headquarter expansion, which will create 1,229 jobs. Additionally, Honeywell's relocation of its global headquarters to Charlotte will create 750 high-paying new jobs over the next five years.
- And the continued job growth and low unemployment rate is paying off -- sales taxes collected for the County are up 4.2% for Fiscal Year 2019 thanks to low unemployment, high consumer sentiment, low fuel prices, and increasing wages.

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- And for these reasons -- Mecklenburg County continues to be a place where people choose to live, work, grow and retire. In the last year our population has increased by 1.9%, with more than one million, seventy-six thousand residents, now calling Mecklenburg County home.
- But as our community continues to grow – so should the number of services and resources to accommodate the increasing population. That is why the County plans to invest \$1.57 billion dollars to fund improvements to our schools, parks and public services through our five-year Capital Improvement Plan.
- We must continue to make sure that the resources within our community are available to everyone – regardless of their ZIP code, socioeconomic background, or educational level. We must ensure that the County remains a place where people will want to raise their families. It must remain a place that plans and provides for our elderly – as well as a place that offers a strong foundation for our youth.
- Mecklenburg County must continue to be innovative and effective in our strategies, while opening the door to bold new practices that will help to transform our community. We must be methodical – while looking for new ways to impact our community.

- That is why the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners has selected these five areas as our top priorities for fiscal year 2020:
- We as a Board are committed to reducing racial disparities in Mecklenburg County so that everyone is afforded the same experience regardless of race or ethnicity.
- We plan to continue our commitment to funding the Meck Pre-K program – so that four-year olds will be provided the foundation needed to begin their primary school years with success.
- We as a Board are committed to searching for ways to support and create affordable housing – while helping to reduce the number of people who do not have a place to call home.
- We are also committed to expanding mental health support and access to those in need.
- And we will continue to make the development and completion of our parks and greenway projects a top priority for the physical, mental and general welfare of our community.
- But those are the Board’s priorities. In December, the County launched a community engagement campaign to find out which issues matter most to all of you. The Resident Budget Priorities Survey was developed to give residents and community partners an opportunity to provide their input on the issues that matter most to them, ahead of the Budget process.
- We created an opportunity for feedback and the community responded. We received more than 1,600 responses to the survey. And the leading issue respondents care about the most is education.
- Education is also high on my list of priorities. I began my career in politics when I was elected to serve on a PTA board because I realized that through an education, you can create an opportunity to help change people’s lives. That is why Mecklenburg County’s premier Meck Pre-K program is so important.

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- Decades of research has shown that pre-kindergarten makes a difference in school readiness not just in the short-term by preparing children for kindergarten, but in the long-term as children grow up, become employed, and contribute to the strength of the economy.
- With adoption of the Fiscal Year 2019 budget, the County provided \$8.75 million dollars in funding to create the MECK Pre-K program through a partnership with Smart Start of Mecklenburg County.
- Thirty-three MECK pre-K classrooms are operating in four- and five-star-rated community-based childcare centers across the county.

- And approximately 600 children, who prior to the program did not have access to pre-kindergarten, are now being afforded the opportunity because of the County's investment in early childhood education.
- To date, 824 applications have been received, and 544 children are actively participating in the first year of the County's MECK Pre-K Program.
- And an executive committee has recommended that the County continue to increase funding to offer voluntary, universal public pre-k (referred to as MECK Pre-K) for all 4-year-old children in the county to be phased in over a six-year period.
- Part of that plan includes clearing the child care subsidy waiting list for children under age five, in addition to providing continuity of care or, ongoing care, for children currently being served.
- Early Childhood Education programs tend to have long waiting lists because the need for childcare assistance often exceeds available funding. But without access to these programs children often start school behind the curve in comparison to their classmates and unfortunately, they often stay behind.
- Currently there are 2,122 children on waiting lists in Mecklenburg County. But we are working to reduce that number.
- That's why the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners approved \$6 million in FY18 and FY19 to reduce the child care waiting list. Together with additional federal funding, 340 more children from birth to age 5 are currently receiving child care assistance compared to June of 2017 when the Committee's initial landscape review was completed.
- The Board has also demonstrated their dedication to education by funding several projects that will help to improve resources and provide opportunities for hundreds of Charlotte-Mecklenburg School students and CMS staff.
- The Board approved 29 school capital projects with a cost of approximately \$922 million in the Fiscal Year 2019 through Fiscal Year 2023 Capital Improvement plan. This includes 10 new schools, 7 replacement schools, 12 renovations and additions to reduce overcrowding.
- In addition, the Fiscal Year 2019 budget included an increase of 31.1 million for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools operating budget. The amount funded is intended to fund salary increases for locally funded employees, increased costs for health insurance and retirement contributions, charter school enrollment growth and for additional facility space.
- And the budget also included a one-time funding of \$4.6 million in restricted contingency for security enhancements throughout the district.

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- Another big issue that is on most everyone's minds right now is the countywide revaluation. First, I would like to thank Ken Joyner and his staff for their work leading up to and in the days following the mailings of the revaluation notices.
- Preparations for the 2019 Revaluation began in 2014, as the Assessor's Office focused their efforts on the areas that would improve the revaluation process.
- The department focused on extensive trainings for its staff, focusing on customer service. The department also set out to educate the community to the revaluation process by hosting more than 150 community engagement sessions across the County. The department also worked to improve quality control processes, in addition to revamping their website, MeckReval.com. The department also worked with the County's Public Information Department to launch a robust media campaign – all while field canvassing more than 305 thousand parcels.
- The department's hard work culminated last month with the release of nearly 400,000 Notices to property owners.
- And their work did not stop after the notices were sent in the mail. The County and several commissioners continue to hold listening sessions and town hall events to help answer questions and provide additional information to the public.
- I want to remind the public that the Notice of 2019 Real Estate Assessed Value is not a bill.
- Property taxes are separate, and the tax rate won't be decided until the Board, and other local jurisdictions, approve their Fiscal Year 2020 budgets in June.
- The Board understands the many concerns some property owners may have after viewing their revaluation notices, especially those who are on fixed incomes or limited resources. Please know that we will take these factors in consideration, as we work towards reaching a final decision on the tax rate.

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- Another resounding issue with many Mecklenburg County residents is affordable housing.
- Affordable housing is an issue with many layers that requires leadership both from the County and the city of Charlotte to work together to solve.
- Mecklenburg County plays a key role in driving change in the community to end and prevent homelessness and ensure that there is enough housing affordable to everyone. This is accomplished by providing leadership, oversight, funding, services, housing, data, research and informing policy.

- The challenges for people facing housing instability and homelessness are linked. These include access to affordable housing, employment, healthcare, childcare, transportation and supportive services like mental health and substance use treatment. Many of the Health and Human Services departments in Mecklenburg County intersect with these challenges and are therefore, uniquely positioned to play a key role in helping individuals and families access and sustain their housing.
- Some of our key initiatives include:
- The Housing & Homelessness Dashboard, which serves as a one-stop hub for all information on housing and homelessness in the community, connecting data and research with all stakeholders in the community. Data from this year's Point-in-Time Homeless Count will be added to the dashboard this summer.
- Our Community Support Services Department provides over \$1.5 million in supportive services funding to help agencies across Mecklenburg County who help individuals and families obtain housing as well as sustain it.

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- And as we strive to ensure that Mecklenburg County remains a place for our residents to work, learn and grow – we're also working to ensure that our residents have the recreational amenities they need to stay active and healthy.
- From parks to recreation and senior centers, nature centers to aquatics facilities, we offer something for everyone and we are always looking to expand our list of amenities.
- Our Park and Recreation Department is doing a tremendous job of meeting the demand for new greenway construction.
- Recently, the department completed Briar Creek Greenway, Little Sugar Creek Greenway and Campbell Creek Greenway bringing our total greenway system to more than 50 miles.
- And we aren't stopping there.
- As part of the \$1.57 billion Fiscal Year 2019 through Fiscal Year 2023 Capital Improvement Plan, we have several new greenways that we will be adding for our residents to enjoy, including the extension of Little Sugar Creek Greenway to the South Carolina state line.
- With this plan in place, we anticipate increasing our greenway system to more than 90 miles by 2027.
- As we look toward the future, we will continue to aggressively find ways to expand the system even further.

- Our goal is to have more than 300 miles of greenways in Mecklenburg County.
- With the dedication of staff and our commitment to providing the very best recreational amenities to residents, I am confident that we will reach this goal.
- And the Board also formed the Environmental Stewardship Committee. The committee is charged with sustaining and enhancing the environment while protecting our air – water and land.

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- But just as our work within the County is important to the success of our programs for our residents, building and maintaining relationships with other government entities is equally important as well.
- Vice-Chair Elaine Powell and district representative Susan Rodriguez-McDowell, the County Manager and I traveled the County meeting with the leadership and other municipalities. The meetings were well received, and we look forward to continuing the dialogue. We also met with the Mayor and Vice Mayor, City Manager, the Chair and Vice Chair of the school board and the Superintendent.
- We also hosted a legislative breakfast with elected officials from the surrounding towns and our state legislative delegation. During the occasion we solicited support for our legislative priorities, and we had open dialogue about concerns, collaborative opportunities and mutual goals.
- Our Intergovernmental Committee works to coordinate relations between and among Mecklenburg County and governing bodies operating within the County at the federal, state and local levels. The committee, led by Commissioner Mark Jarrell, is passionate about pursuing shared policy initiatives with City of Charlotte and the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools to address needs in our community.
- The Health and Human Services committee, under the leadership of Commissioner Vilma Leake has worked with our Health Director Gibbie Harris to strengthen our Health Department. Gibbie Harris and her staff have worked tirelessly for the benefit of our community. They should all be commended for their hard work.
- And recently, senior leaders of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services met with our Health and Human Services Director, Rodney Adams for a tour of our new Community Resource Center. Following the tour, the group discussed ways to enhance our efforts of providing integrated and impactful community-based services to our residents.

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- In closing, 2018 has been a big year for Mecklenburg County and it is my vision and hope that 2019 will be even greater.



- Thank you for your partnerships and support and for allowing us to serve you, the residents of Mecklenburg County.

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